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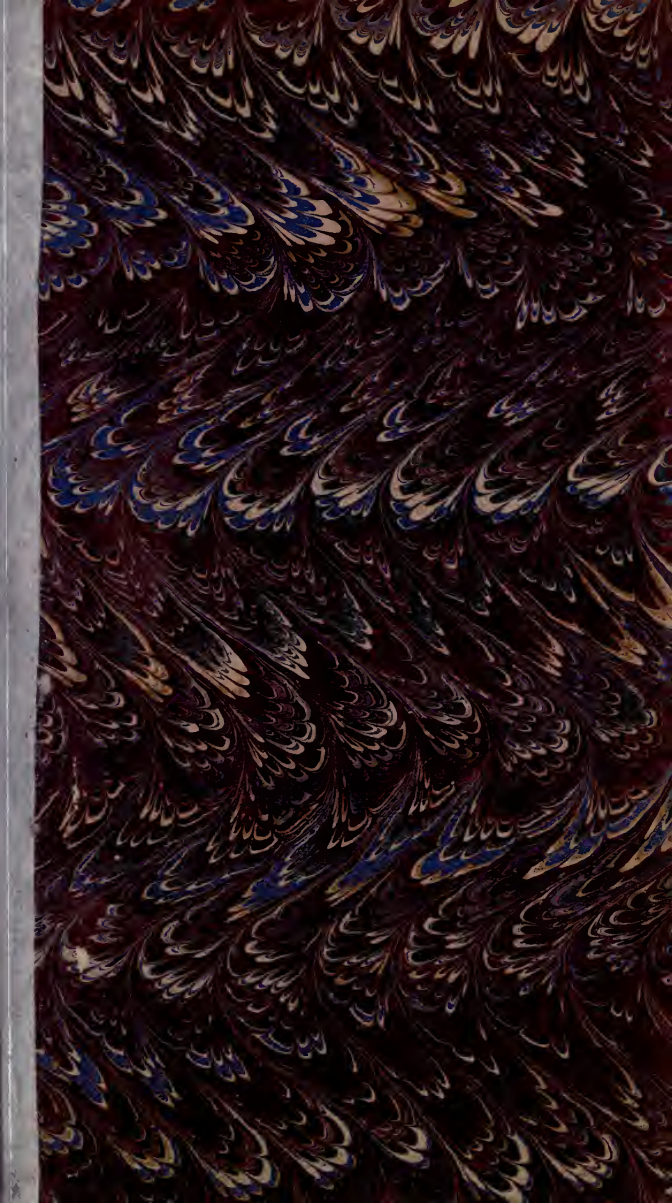


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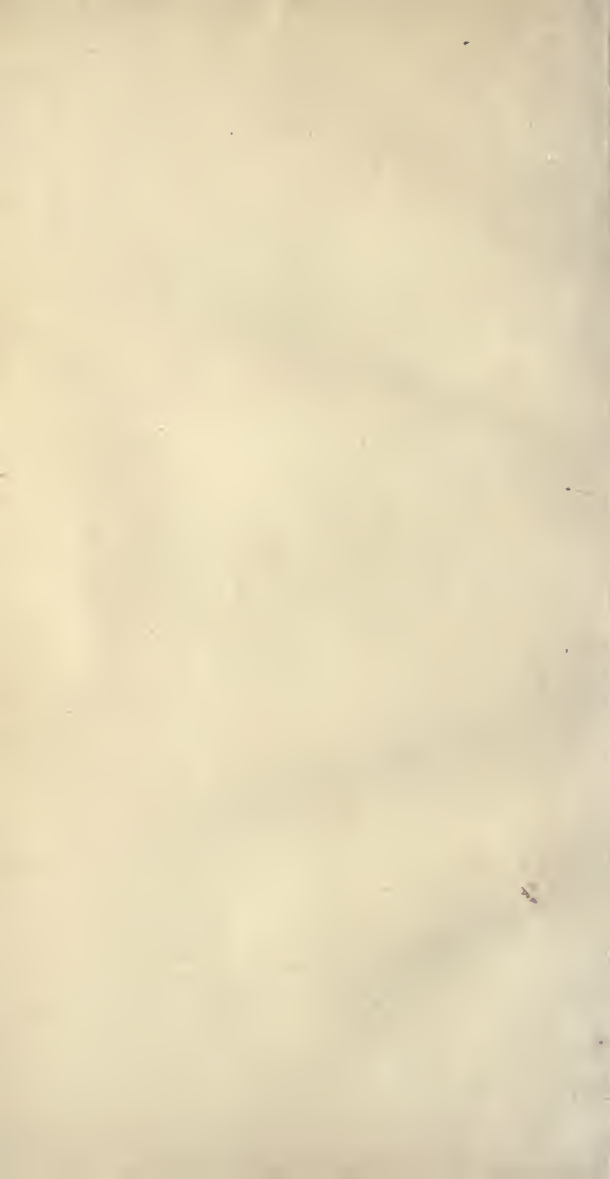
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THE DRAMA

BY

MRS. KENDAL



LONDON

DAVID BOGUE, 3 ST. MARTIN'S PLACE
TRAFALGAR SQUARE







THE DRAMA

I desire that all profit
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THE DRAMA

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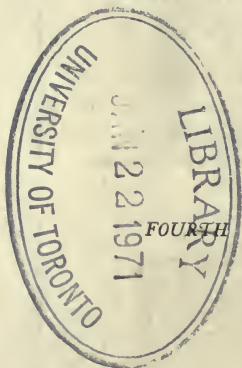
MRS. KENDAL

*A PAPER READ AT THE CONGRESS
OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE
PROMOTION OF SOCIAL SCIENCE,
BIRMINGHAM, SEPTEMBER 1884*



LONDON

DAVID BOGUE, 3 ST. MARTIN'S PLACE,
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THE DRAMA.



IN dealing with the Drama within the necessarily brief limits of a Social Science Association paper, the great difficulty is to decide from what point of view so large a subject is to be treated. That it should have a place in your discussions seems appropriate enough, for assuredly there never was a time when the Theatre was more popular, or so much a topic of conversation, as now. The English people are indeed rapidly becoming alive to the fact that the "progress and culture of a nation depend upon its diversions as well as upon its occupations," and as a matter of consequence the Dramatic Art is receiving an unprecedented meed of recognition. It appears to me, therefore, that the most useful thing for me to do to-day will be to glance for a few moments at the

difference in the condition of the Drama in its earliest days and now, and to consider in what ways it has improved, in what deteriorated. That it has in many ways improved, every playgoer of intelligence must admit ; that it has in some ways deteriorated, those who are closely associated with it are forced to allow.

It is an easy and a pleasant task to speak of its improvements. I believe—nay, I know—that there still exist very worthy but self-constituted critics who speak with shake of head and regretful sigh of what are called the “palmy days” of the Drama. That grand actors and consummate actresses lived in bygone days is a matter beyond all dispute ; and indeed when one comes to consider the conditions under which they were compelled to follow their art, it seems almost impossible to speak too highly of the genius which enabled them indelibly to stamp their names upon the age in which they lived, and which will cause them to be honourably—nay, gloriously—remembered in ages yet to come. But surely I am justified in saying that the playgoer of to-day possesses advantages far and away above those which his forefathers enjoyed. Let us compare for a moment the play-

houses of which we read with those with which we are familiar.

In the old days the utmost disorder was allowed to exist in the half-lighted auditorium. Eating and drinking were freely indulged in; smoking was permitted; wine, spirits, and tobacco were hawked about; card-playing was resorted to between the acts; the more distinguished among the audience were allowed to walk and sit on the stage, and to converse with the performers. It was no disgrace in those days for gentlemen of good social position to be seen tipsy at the play, and of course drunken brawls and disgraceful quarrels were of frequent occurrence.

The entertainment provided on the stage was on a level with the intellect of the audience, and the playgoers were looked upon as "rogues and vagabonds." No wonder that the Drama got a bad name, or that people with a Puritanical turn of mind regarded it with dismay.

Of course all this is going back a very long way, and matters began by degrees to improve; but I venture to say that it was not until the present generation that correctness in costume, fidelity in scene-painting, and attention to every little detail con-

nected with the action, came to be looked upon as absolutely essential to the proper production of a play.

Nowadays, indeed, that which is technically known as the "staging" of a play is in itself a work of true art, and in its own way gives rise to as much thought and care as the author has for his dialogue or the actor for his part. It has been objected lately that too much attention is apt to be given to scenery, furniture, and accessories, and that there is a danger of the Drama suffering from over-elaboration in this direction. In plain English, this means a thing may be too well done; and it seems hard to subscribe to such a theory. Our forefathers, you will remember, were content with a background for their plays on which the name of the place supposed to be represented was written up, such as—"This is Thebes," or "This is a forest;" or sometimes even this trouble was not taken, and the actors had to inform the audience where the action of the piece lay.

"Our scene is Rhodes,"

is the brilliant opening line given to an actor in an old drama.

These crude arrangements gave way to the introduction of scenery, but it was a

long time before anything like correctness was attempted, and we can most of us remember the days when there was no complaint of the thing being "overdone." Can it be "overdone"? If a scene is to be represented at all, can it be given with too much truth or attention to detail? Of course, lack of judgment spoils everything, and it is very likely that mistakes in this direction have given rise to the complaint. It is useless to lavish mere money on a scene. If the interior of a peasant's cottage is to be represented, much expenditure on the furniture would be ridiculous; but surely the artistic care that reproduces the humble home of the labourer, down to such minute details as, say, the "sampler" stitched in silk which his wife had worked when a girl at the village school, and which now decorates his walls, is a thing to be admired.

Again, if the scene is a landscape, ought it not to be made as true to lovely nature as the resources of art will allow? Or if it is a room in a palace, can it be too beautifully given? If the surroundings and *minutiae* of such scenes are correct and in good taste, they must add not only to the enjoyment, but to the *education* of an audience; for it may be reasonably supposed that the

frequenters of the less expensive seats in a theatre have not many opportunities of becoming familiar with the interiors of palaces; and it is certain that the jaded City clerk, who seeks a little recreation at the play, does not see too much of landscape, nor has he a very intimate acquaintance with the indescribable attractions of an English villager's home. Perhaps it would be well for those who are disposed to be satirical concerning what they call "over-attention to detail" and "over-elaboration," to give a thought to this side of the question before airing their opinions.

It may then, I think, be conceded that in matters of scenery the improvements are not only great but remarkable.

The comfort of the audience, too—is not that considered nowadays as it was never considered before? For obvious reasons I do not often form one of an audience myself, but I should certainly think that good light, attention to warmth and ventilation, soft cushions, ample room, good music, and, above all cleanliness, are things to be appreciated and to be added to our list of improvements.

And while advances in this respect have been made before the curtain, equally great

ones have taken place behind it, and actors and actresses are at last surrounded by the conveniences and comforts which gentlemen and ladies have a right to expect. For the improvements—the great improvements—that have been made in this way honour should be given where honour is due. It was the Management of the Prince of Wales Theatre that, some seventeen years ago, first paid attention to the comfort of the artists it engaged, and made the theatre behind the scenes what it now is. This fact should be recorded, because praise is too often given to those who have only followed a good example.

We have more play-writers, too, than of old ; and although a cry is constantly going up that there is a dearth of good dramatists, it is a matter of fact that much excellent modern literary work has been, and is, associated with the Stage.

It is to be feared that the playwright of to-day is hardly appreciated as he should be. His work is subject to keen and universal criticism ; for it is a curious fact, that whereas few would venture to criticize books, poems, or paintings without some little special knowledge, every one thinks he has a right to pronounce judgment on a

stage-play, and is convinced that that judgment is infallible. And, again, the dramatist runs the risk of being misinterpreted, and consequently misunderstood. His work, moreover, does not find its place on the library shelf, and is seldom read; but the improved condition of the Theatre has made the most famous literary men of the day anxious to identify their names with it; and let us hope that this desire will increase and bring forth good fruit as matters still further improve.

But perhaps the most remarkable change that has come over the condition of the Drama is the fact that there is at last a recognised social position for the professional player. Formerly actors formed a little body in themselves. The Theatrical Profession was considered outside, if not beneath, all others, and was regarded with something like contempt. It was a wrong, a cruel, and an absurd state of things, for even then the Theatre was popular, and was doing good work. Perhaps you may remember Garrick's famous reply to the Bishop, who told him that he could not understand why his theatre was always full while his church was always empty. "I think, my Lord," said Garrick, "it is

because I deal with fiction as though it were a truth, while you preach a truth as though it were a fiction." Members of all the other professions were glad enough to come and amuse themselves with the outcome of the actor's genius ; his ability was recognised ; it was, as it is now, the subject of universal conversation and of much newspaper comment ; but the door of "society" was closed to him. Now all that is altered. The Theatrical Profession is acknowledged to be a high and important one, and the society of the intelligent and cultivated actor is eagerly sought after. Just at present, indeed, the new state of things, having become universally known and recognised, has become also a little embarrassing.

★ One is always hearing or reading in the papers that the professions are "overstocked"—that there are too many clergymen, too many lawyers, too many doctors, and the fact that the terms of actor and of gentleman may now be regarded as synonymous, seems to have sent the "overdraft" of all these other professions headlong on to the stage.

How many younger sons of well-born but not too well-to-do parents have hailed the present social position of the actor with

delight? How many educated girls, finding themselves, through force of circumstances, suddenly compelled to face the world on their own account, have turned with a sigh of relief from the prospect of the stereotyped position of "companion," or "governess" to the vista that an honourable connection with the Stage holds out to them? From these, and from other sources, the Theatrical Profession also runs the risk of becoming "over-stocked."

These young aspirants rush to the Stage as to a promised land. The would-be actors congratulate themselves on the fact that there are no "stiff" examinations to pass; they complacently regard their handsome young faces in the looking-glass; they contemplate with satisfaction the latest efforts of their West-end tailors, and think themselves on the high-road to fame and fortune.

A young man of this stamp not long ago called upon a London manager, sent in his card, and being admitted to his presence, informed him that he had made up his mind to "go on the stage," and was prepared to accept an engagement. The manager, not unnaturally, asked some questions as to his qualifications for the career which he proposed for himself.

“Had he any experience as an actor? Had he studied the dramatic art?” “No,” was the reply, “but he had decided to ‘go on the stage,’ and all that he wanted was an engagement.” The manager led him to the door, and, returning his card, pointed to a building on the opposite side of the street. “That,” said he, “is a bank; go and present yourself there. Say that, without knowing anything about the business, you have made up your mind to be a banker’s clerk, and ask for a situation. If you succeed in getting one, come back here and I will engage you as an actor.” The young gentleman took his departure, but *he did not return!*

The would-be actresses are more diffident, and are certainly more disposed to devote heart and soul to their work; but neither the one nor the other has the slightest idea of the amount of study, of labour, and of devotion to the art—to say nothing of natural aptitude—that is necessary for success.

Another advance that may be claimed for the Drama in these days of its improvement is its influence as a teacher—for a teacher it always has been, and ever will be.

Temperaments differ everywhere, and one of the first things that a boy or girl has to find out is what will exercise the greatest influence over his or her nature. There are many young people who are perfectly content and happy with the amusements that are afforded by study, by a happy home life, and by pleasant social intercourse ; but there are also many who require a little more than this, and who can only show what is best in their undeveloped natures under the influence of an appeal to their imaginations. These rush to the Drama as the thirsty wayfarer rushes to the cooling brooklet.

How important it is, therefore, that the draught should be pure, that the refreshment should be really wholesome and useful. It is quite certain that many hundreds—nay, thousands—of people have been influenced for good or for evil by what they have seen portrayed upon the stage. Those who go to the theatre with the capability of weeping over scenes in which honest self-sacrifice is depicted ; of being aroused to enthusiasm over the success of manly effort or womanly devotion ; or of feeling genuine contempt for the portrayal of meanness, treachery, and snobbery, will come away from a good play, well acted, having learnt

a lesson and gained an experience that will probably be remembered with advantage throughout the remainder of their lives. A pure Stage is likely to be surrounded by a pure people, and its influence from this point of view can hardly be over-estimated.

It is worth while here, perhaps, to look upon the influence that the Dramatic Art has upon those most intimately associated with it. The playing of many parts naturally gives to the actor and actress a curious insight into the sentiments and passions that sway and bias human nature. The earnest actor, who has heart and soul in his work, and conscientiously studies the various parts he is called upon to play, is compelled to think, more than the mere man of business, of human strength and weakness, of hate and love, of joy and sorrow; for in their turn he has to portray them all, and, to judge by results, the effect upon his nature is to make him very charitable.

Where, I may safely ask, is charity more openly or more cheerfully practised than among the members of the Theatrical Profession? I do not allude to mere almsgiving—the readiness with which an actor will in that way help a comrade who has

fallen by the way has become proverbial ; but to charity of a very different and more valuable kind.

Clergymen preach forgiveness, but they do not welcome among their own body men whose names are identified with a stormy past, but who would gladly do useful work in a peaceful future. Lawyers have to do with justice, but they look with wary eye on those who have once tripped, and conscientiously warn their clients to have nothing to do with such easily misled and consequently dangerous creatures. Doctors practise the healing art, but their nostrums are for broken bones and bodily hurts ; they have no salve for the weary mind or the lacerated heart.

The Theatrical Profession, on the other hand, offers chances to all men and women, no matter what their past has been ; and it is in this way that I maintain it to be a more charitable one than any other. A sad and undeserved consequence of this is, that actors are liable to suffer as a body for the very charities they so unselfishly practise, for they give the outside world opportunities of indulging in that scandal about the Stage which apparently forms one of its chief delights. The Puritanical-minded point to some too well-known "backslider" who

is endeavouring to earn a living in a theatre, lift up their pious hands in horror, and condemn the whole profession. It would be well, indeed, if these worthy people would take the trouble to look a little further into the matter, and ascertain how cruelly unjust such condemnation is.

In all these things—and if time permitted I could mention many more—the Drama, it may be safely maintained, has not only held its ground, but improved. But I am now quite half-way through the time allotted by the Social Science Association for my paper, and I must turn to the other side of the question, and tell you in what ways the Drama of the present day has deteriorated, and, unless actors and actresses will be true to themselves and the honourable profession that they follow, is likely still further to deteriorate.

No true lover of the Dramatic Art can look with satisfaction on the many ways in which it is now advertised. Neither the painter nor the poet thinks it advisable to fill the columns of the daily papers with the monotonous repetition of what this or that critic has said of his work, or to keep his name constantly, and with wearisome

persistence, before the public. The extent to which some carry out this system, and the pains taken over it, is simply beyond all description. An insatiable thirst for newspaper paragraphs is always tormenting them, and in every action of their lives the thought of "How will that advertise me?" or, "How can I use this as an advertisement?" is predominant. With people thus constituted, even affliction is turned to what they consider profitable account, and at a dull period an illness is regarded as a positive boon.

This absurd mania seems to be in a great measure, I am sorry to say, peculiar to the members of the Theatrical Profession, and it assuredly does not add to their dignity. It is done in manifold ways—in what are known as "receptions" at theatres, in railway station "demonstrations," by photography, and by speech-making, and one and all are degrading to the Drama. As a cloak for incapability such means may be excusable, but true art in every branch advertises itself. Advertising nowadays is an art, but it is *not* the art of Acting.

This state of things has given rise to a flippant and what may be termed "personal" style of theatrical journalism, which is greatly to be deplored, and should cer-

tainly be discouraged. The so-called theatrical papers, in which the leading artists of the stage are alluded to by their Christian names, and where insolent and generally untrue gossip and tittle-tattle take the place of honest criticism, are absolutely debasing to the profession. The unfortunate outcome of all this is, that the artist's capability, or, more properly speaking, "popularity," is too often gauged by the amount of publicity that is given to every little action of his or her life. An unthinking section of the public is hungry for news of this description, and incompetent but "knowing" actors and their managers take advantage of it.

Another way in which the Drama has certainly deteriorated is the style of play that now attracts popular audiences. Our forefathers could laugh heartily over a good farce, but the staple fare of the evening had to be the serious or poetical Drama, in which some good moral would be pointed out, and literary merit would be looked for and found. At the present time, however, audiences enjoy a whole evening of farce, and farce of a very remarkable nature? What, in reality, can be a more painful spectacle than that of an innocent and un-

suspecting wife being hoodwinked and deceived by a graceless and profligate husband? Years ago it would have formed the groundwork of a very pathetic play, if not of a tragedy; but now it is a never-failing source of delight to the lover of elongated farce; and the greater the innocence of the wife, and the more outrageous the misconduct of the husband, the louder are the shrieks of laughter with which their misunderstandings are received.

For this, alas! we have to thank our French friends; and the "suggestiveness" which pervades the dialogue of too many modern plays is another foreign importation that might very well be spared. That most of the old plays were indelicate is a matter of fact, but they were a reflection of the times in which they were produced. In those days a spade was called a spade, and plain speaking was not only tolerated but expected. That disagreeable "suggestion" should have taken the place of downright coarseness is a bad sign of the taste of the modern playgoer. Of course there are very clever and very amusing pieces of this order, but their success has given rise to a host of vulgar and clumsy imitations, which, while attracting audiences, certainly do no credit to the English stage.

In what is known as burlesque, too, the modern Theatre has decidedly deteriorated. Genuine travesty and pantomime are distinct and recognized branches of the Dramatic Art ; but though some good burlesque pieces, in which witty authors and clever actors unite to create a hearty, wholesome, and good-humoured laugh, are happily produced from time to time, the so-called burlesque with which the modern playgoer is familiar, and which, it must be owned, he seems to enjoy, is not a very high-toned entertainment. I am sure that if fanciful children were taken to these pieces, it would be a real source of sorrow to them to see such trusted friends as "Ali Baba," "Aladdin," "Robin Hood," "Robinson Crusoe," "Sinbad the Sailor," and a host of others, treated so badly.

No one in his senses can blame managers or actors for catering for this section of the play-going public. A demand naturally induces a supply, and if Dramatic Art has deteriorated in this direction, the public, and not the profession, is to blame.

I do not think that the Press of the present day does all that it might do for the true welfare of the Drama. Existing critics generally rush into extremes, and either

over-praise or too cruelly condemn. The public, as a matter of course, turns to the newspapers for information. And how can any judgment be formed when either indiscriminate praise or unqualified abuse is given to almost every new piece that is brought out? Criticism, if it is to be worth anything, should surely be "criticism"; but nowadays the writing of a picturesque article, replete with eulogy or the reverse, seems to be the aim of the theatrical reviewer.

Of course the influence of the Press upon the Stage is very powerful, but it will cease to be so if playgoers find that their mentors, the critics, are not trustworthy guides. The public, after all, must decide the fate of a new play. If it be bad, the Englishman of to-day will not declare that it is good because the newspapers have told him so. He will be disappointed, he will be bored, he will tell his friends, and the bad piece will fail to draw audiences.

If, on the other hand, the play is a good one, which has been condemned by the Press, it will quicken the pulse and stir the heart of an audience in spite of adverse criticism; the report that it contains the true ring will go about, and success must follow. In a word, though the Press can

do very much to further the interests of the Stage, it is powerless to kill good work, and it cannot galvanize that which is invertebrate into life. Too many notices are, it is to be feared, written "to order," and the writer who has declined to praise an unsuccessful actor has been known to lose his post; but let us hope that this unjust state of affairs, together with the "chicken and champagne," of which we have heard so much, is a thing of the past.

And here, I think, attention may be suitably called to a duty that the public undoubtedly owes to itself in this matter of criticism, and that is, that it should judge for itself, and not pin a blind faith on all that is told it. It is too true that if playgoers are told that a thing is good they are quite prepared to accept it as such, without taking the trouble to find out whether they have been rightly or wrongly informed. Thus many plays and many actors and actresses are accepted and praised because the critics have declared them to be good. The fact is, the public does not judge for itself, but is influenced and led by "fashion."

Actors nowadays seem to be judged by everything except by the art they follow,

and I maintain that this state of things is peculiar to the Theatrical Profession. Clergymen become popular because they preach good sermons ; lawyers have large practices because they advise their clients well ; doctors increase the number of their patients in proportion to their professional skill ; surely then actors should be successful and popular in accordance with the talent with which they act. But Acting seems to have something akin to "Parr's Life Pills" and "Holloway's Ointment." By advertising those commodities large fortunes were made, and it is the actor who lets the public know, through the newspapers, everything that he does, from the entertainments that he gives to his friends and admirers, down to the goose that he sends his gasman at Christmas, that seems to get the largest following. "Bunkum" of this description has of late years been practised to an extent which is absolutely nauseating ; and all this proves that there is

"Something rotten in the state of Denmark."

A complaint is constantly being made that the moral tone of the Drama of the present day is not so high as it undoubtedly should be ; but for this playgoers are to

blame, for they run after notoriety, and notoriety alone. This may seem a strong accusation, but is it not true? When men and women have done wrong and take to the Stage, is it not a fact that (provided the wrong-doing has been made sufficiently public) brisk business may be expected at the booking office? This, I maintain, never was in the old days, and proves to-day the degradation of our Stage.

Some critics hold that men and women cannot properly act noble and virtuous characters unless they themselves have led spotless lives. I do not go so far as this, but I do maintain that it is pleasanter to think that when the curtain has fallen, and the actor or actress is at home, he or she leads, or is capable of leading, the same kind of life the representation of which has moved an audience to sympathetic tears; and certainly it can be no drawback if, while admiring the artist, the playgoer can at the same time respect the man or woman.

Surely, then, it is more than a necessity that actors and actresses of position, who have the true interest of their noble art in view, should make their lives an example to those with whom they are associated, and to those who are to come after them.

By this means, and by this means only, can the Theatrical Profession expect to maintain its dignity and to secure the high position it should hold in the estimation of the public. It behoves actors and actresses of every degree, while cultivating their talents to elevate and amuse, to lead such lives that those who have regarded the Stage with a suspicious eye will at last give it its proper place in the world of Art.

Time will not allow me to say more. The Drama has an interesting, nay, to some of us a fascinating, Past. It rests with those who make it a profession, and the ever-increasing public that supports it, to secure for it a useful, an elevating, and a glorious Future.





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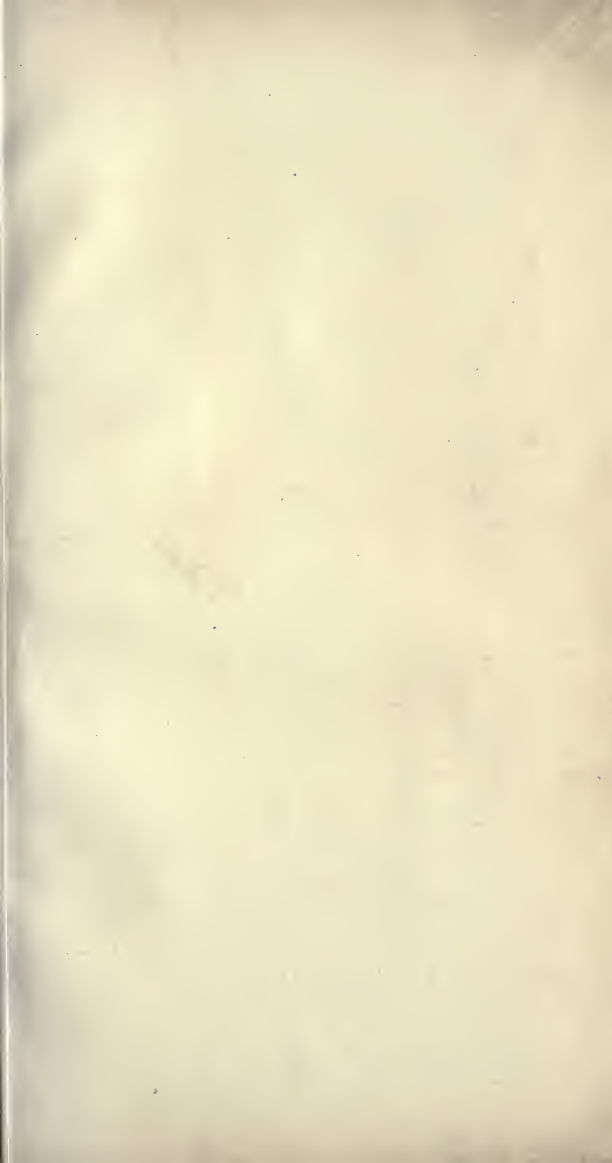
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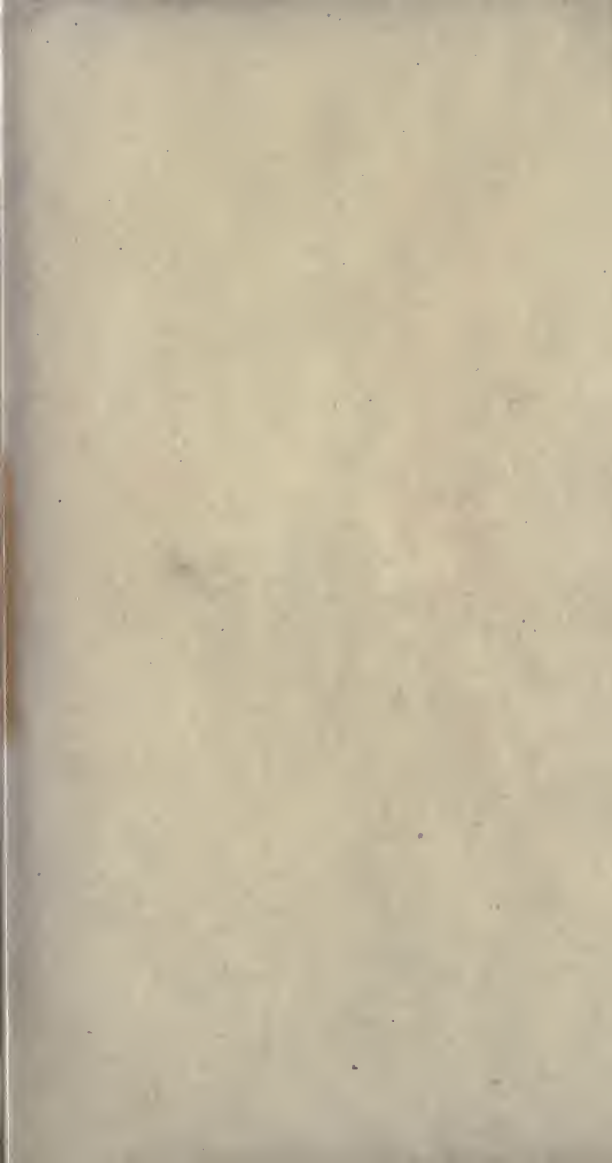
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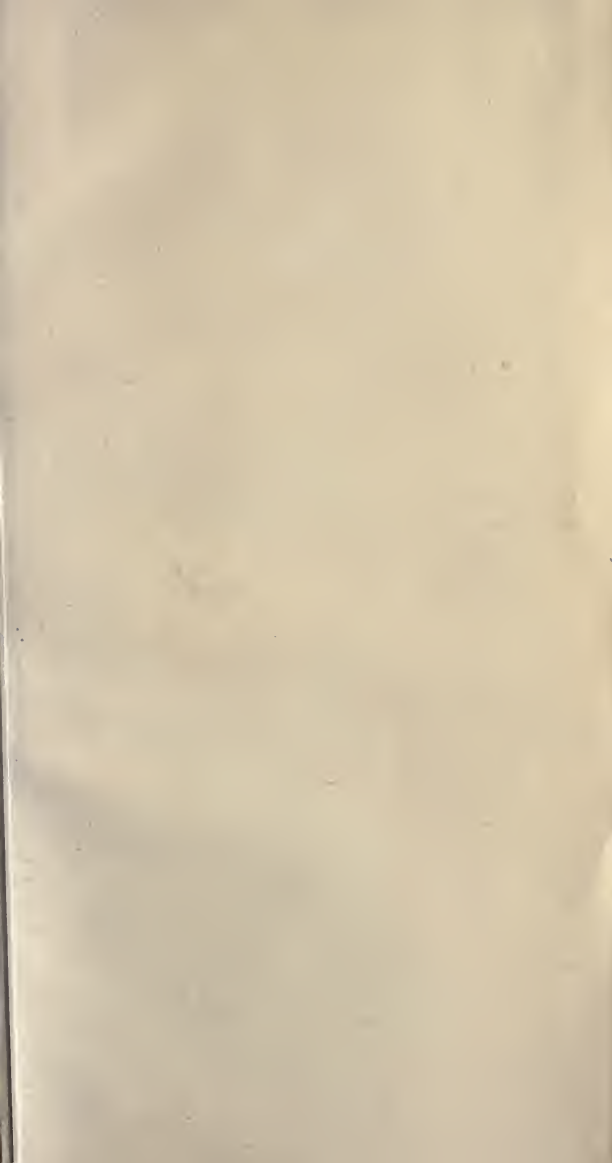


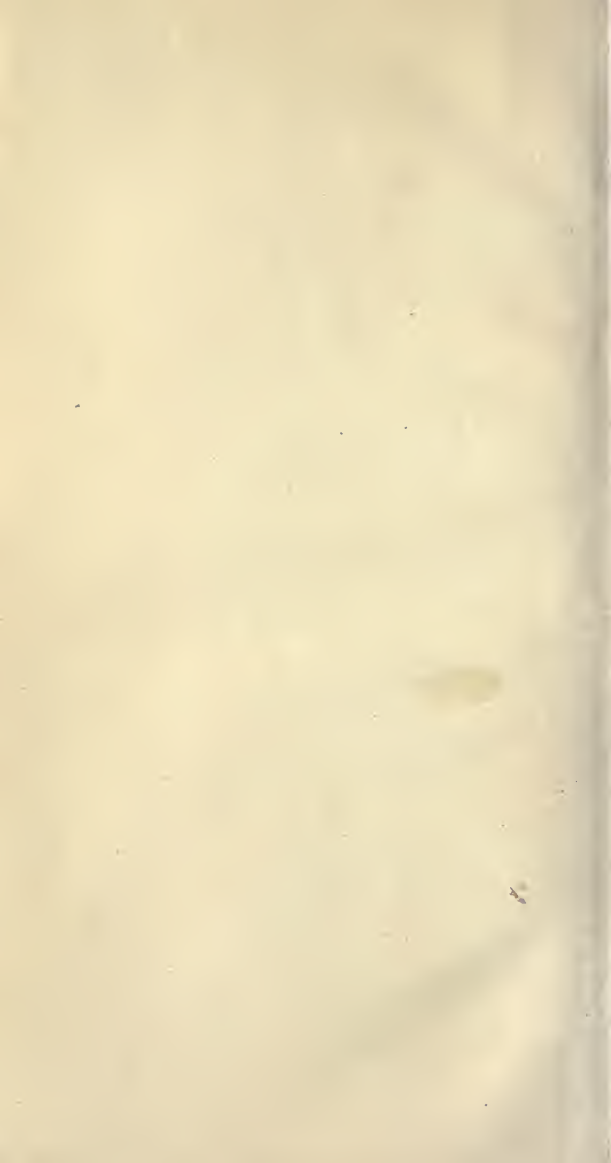


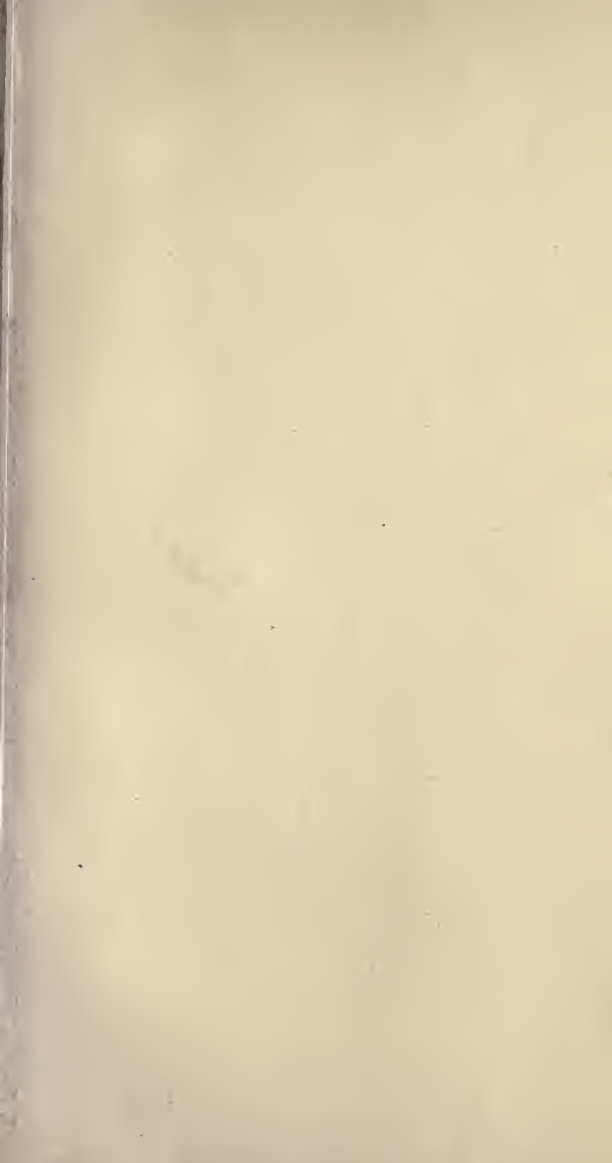


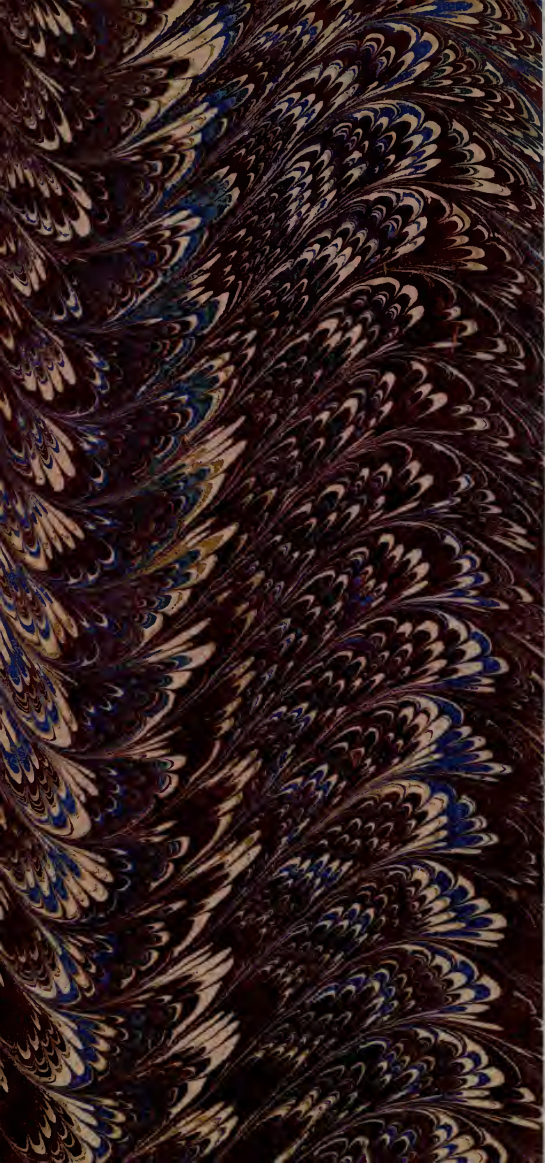












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